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FOOD BY CHEF BOY ARI

The Square Meal

Kesey and the exploration of essential chaos.

The 100-year anniversary of the action in James Joyce's *Ulysses* has been much celebrated in print lately, and justly so. But we're also at the anniversary of another epic journey that's worthy of note. Forty years ago, Ken Kesey and his tribe of Merry Pranksters were on the road from San Francisco to New York, surfing the bow wave of a cultural revolution looming just below the horizon, in waters deceptively placid on the surface. The Great Depression was long gone, put to rest by the victory of World War II. Technology and wealth had made America great, and this was only the beginning. TV dinners foretold microwaves, while a nation of cars gathered like cattle at drive-in troughs, filling up on burgers and milkshakes and blazing a trail for the fast-food herd to follow. Meanwhile, America's dark underbelly continued to fester; segregation, DDT, witch hunts, the taboos of sex. It was an uptight time, with plenty of uptight people determined to keep it that way.

The Merry Pranksters, meanwhile, were overflowing with spontaneous, absurd energy. Kesey had just published *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which used insane asylum interiors as allegory for the cult of control suffocating America. *Cuckoo's Nest* seemed to promise that such oppressive squareness would not — could not — contain humanity's essential chaos in a world that is, after all, round.

The struggle between the square and the circle is about more than shape. It's about humanity's never ending quest to gain a reliable foothold in an environment that is in constant flux. Think of the circle, with its forgiving, flowing curve, as a river. Think of the square as the cup we dip into the river to get a drink. We need them both, the flow and control. To truly embrace the flow would mean being perfectly OK with flowing over a waterfall. On the other hand, to give yourself completely to the square would mean becoming a total nerd, or an uptight nurse like in *Cuckoo's Nest*.

Even Pranksters, it turns out, can be square. As Tom Wolfe reports in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, there were two Pranksters on the bus, Generally Famished and Dis-mount, who "took to going off whenever they could for a square meal. Square on every level . . . in one of those square American Steak houses . . . square steak, square French fries, boiled bland peas and carrots and A-1 steak sauce."

The other Pranksters scoffed at this, maintaining their diet of hamburgers from roadside joints along the highways that Eisenhower built. In hindsight, hamburgers

seem pretty square, too. Should we be disappointed? If there were an organic hippy-food option at every stop, would the Pranksters have gone there instead?

Probably not, my gut tells me. "Never trust a Prankster," went the mantra. And while the Pranksters were full of surprises, one thing that never wavered was their love for America, despite so much about it that was ungroovy. In many ways, the open road and the hamburger epitomized American freedom, and in their loyalty to the road burger, the Pranksters confirmed their deep patriotism.

Hoping to confirm my faith in abstract symbolism, I journeyed to the kitchen to prepare a burger that isn't square. I minced garlic and parsley and mixed them into a paste, which I massaged, with bread-crumbs, into ground meat. I patted the meat into a big flat circle and fried it in bacon grease. In another pan, I made a sauce of mushrooms, garlic, sherry, red wine and butter.

. . .while the

Pranksters were full of surprises, one thing that never wavered was their love for America, despite so much about it that was ungroovy.

As the outside of the burger got crispy, it started smelling really good. But I realized that the inside of this round patty would never taste as good as the surface. The surface, yes! Surface area is the key! More surface area means more tasty crispiness to soak up the tangy, earthy, mushroom sauce.

I may be a sucker for symbols, but I couldn't bear the thought of eating the tepid, soft, parsley-infested interior of that patty. This is how Dante must have felt in the center of heaven, how Kesey must have felt when they reached New York and nobody seemed to care.

Pissed, I dug into the big round patty with the blade of my spatula, cutting it into small pieces: oblong spheroids, trapezoids and, yes, squares. When they were crispy all around, I stirred them into the mushroom sauce and then served the crispy chunks on French bread slices with mayo. Was it still a burger? Was it square? I don't know. And at this point, I don't care. **EW**

Chef Boy Ari, also known as Ari LaVaux, is currently living and cooking in Missoula, Mont.

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